

# **The International Socialist Women's Conference**

**by Gerd Callesen**

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At the International Socialist Congress held in Paris in July 1889, Clara Zetkin gave a much acclaimed speech in which she demanded the integration of women workers into the Labour Movement. She underpinned her argument by quoting August Bebel who, with his book "Woman in the Past, Present and Future", had provided an in-depth analysis of women's position in society. The same year saw the publication of Zetkin's pamphlet, "Die Arbeiterinnen- und Frauenfragen der Gegenwart [Women-Worker and Feminist Issues of our Times] (1889) which was based on her speech to the Congress.<sup>(1)</sup> This pamphlet is considered the central contribution to early socialist woman's emancipation by many people. In it, Zetkin stressed that woman wage labour should not only be perceived as an economic necessity, but as an indispensable step towards gender equality, because it guaranteed the independence of women from men. Because of it, men and women would no longer have to fight each other, but would have to join forces to achieve fundamental social change. This Congress, as well as subsequent Congresses, adopted resolutions on the woman issue reflecting the inconsistency between measures to protect women at work and the need for woman emancipation. In the words of Louise Kautsky, women workers were to act as "battering rams for the protection of men at work". However, all in all it was only partially possible to make the woman issue into an accelerant factor in the Socialist Movement. A separate meeting held by the women delegates to the London Congress of 1896 did little to change this. The woman issue, or rather, the issue of women workers, remained an issue of secondary importance.

However, from the beginning of the 20th century, more and more women in several countries began organizing themselves in special women's sections of the party. In the trade union movement a number of organizations reserved exclusively for women had already seen the light of day, and they also grew in strength after the turn of the century. The vast majority of women working in manufacturing industry were unskilled, and only to a very limited extent did women become skilled workers, and even they were only admitted to the skilled trade unions with considerable reluctance. The best paid women, who were also the best organized, were women teachers, but they kept aloof from the trade union movement and only showed any solidarity with women workers taking industrial action in very

exceptional cases, as it was put in 1899 in connection with a polemic discussion in the Copenhagen newspaper the *Social-Demokraten*.<sup>(2)</sup> The basis on which discussions were pursued differed from country to country, but it is likely that in the most important countries the basis for the discussions were Zetkin's notion that it was essential to bring Socialist ideas to the attention of women and not to make separate demands on behalf of women. The main task was, according to Zetkin, to integrate women into all aspects of the class struggle in order to achieve equal rights for women in this way. With this, here admittedly highly condensed, objective in mind, Zetkin edited the most important socialist women's periodical, *Die Gleichheit*[Equality].<sup>(3)</sup> At the German Women's Conference in 1906, the idea was launched to hold an international Women's Conference in connection with the International Socialist Congress to be held in 1907 in Stuttgart. Apparently time was now ripe, and 58 delegates from 15 countries took part in this 1st International Women's Conference; here Clara Zetkin spoke on the question of international cooperation. The Conference resolved to set up a secretariat, and this was to be located at the editorial office of the *Gleichheit*, which was at the same time assigned with the task of being the common publication for all the affiliates. In the following years this periodical published much material on the international socialist women's movement. This should also be seen as a tribute to Clara Zetkin and her theoretical and political contribution - after all, other periodicals of the Labour Movement would have been capable of undertaking this assignment.

Even yet it is not possible to make a full assessment of the importance of this periodical or of the role played by Zetkin on the left wing of the Labour Movement for the development of a woman workers' movement in different countries.<sup>(4)</sup> It also remains a debatable issue whether Zetkin's opinion that women workers were to be subsumed into the general Labour Movement were the most effective long-term tactics. A number of issues relating to the Labour Movement and to the women's movement as a whole require further investigation; in particular the issue of the connection between the struggle to achieve emancipation as a class and/or as gendered beings remains unclear. Of course, these issues were up for discussion in the movement of the time, and they have stayed topical ever since. It also remains an open question whether some specific themes were left to women exclusively in order to pacify them, in order to sidetrack them or whether such issues as the protection of children and mothers, peace, woman franchise were in fact (objectively) of special relevance to women, and, for that reason, were better suited for being used in socialist agitation among women.

The Stuttgart Conference also adopted a demand for universal suffrage for women, a demand which the International Socialist Congress made its own. This was a major step forward, considering, for example, that, without demure, the Austrian Labour

Movement, including its women members, had accepted a new election act which only entitled men to vote.

100 delegates representing 17 countries participated in the second conference 1910 in Copenhagen. This conference has become famous primarily for its resolution to introduce an International Women's Day, first and foremost aimed at strengthening the fight for woman enfranchisement. Events and demonstrations were to be held on the first Sunday in March in all countries. The International Women's day was celebrated for the first time on 19 March 1911 in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland.<sup>(5)</sup> Over the following years, more countries joined in, though it was not always possible to hold events on the same date in all countries, but the date always fell in spring - and today 8 March has been uniformly established as the International Women's Day. At this conference there was furthermore a harsh conflict concerning the central issue of a ban against night work for women. Danish and Swedish delegates were in favour of a resolution opposing a ban on night work for adult women and instead demanded the adoption of a resolution "forbidding night work for both men and women". A majority was against this resolution; primarily Clara Zetkin and Nina Bang were vehement in their opposition to this proposal. (Re Point 4 on the agenda).<sup>(6)</sup>

In connection with the 9th Extraordinary International Socialist Congress in Basel 1912 no women's congress as such was held, although women did, of course, participate in it - in addition to Clara Zetkin, Dora Montefiore and Alexandra Kollontay and probably others took the floor - and other women like Rosa Luxemburg who were not directly involved in the women workers' movement were present at the Congress. However, on the occasion of this Congress, Zetkin did issue a special appeal to women workers.

The third Women's Conference was planned to take place in continuation of the 10th International Socialist Congress in Vienna, but like the main event it foundered on the outbreak of the World War. However, some of the material intended for the conference had already been completed. Similarly, Clara Zetkin had received some of the contributions to the general report, and as late as in mid-August 1914 she was still hopeful that this report could be published.<sup>(7)</sup> Apparently this assumption was erroneous, and the reports received were published in the *Gleichheit*.

As regards the Women's International Zetkin concentrated on the preparations for the Bern International Women's Conference in March 1915. This conference was the first important peace rally with participants from the warring nations. Although the Dutch-Scandinavian conference had been held in Copenhagen in January 1915 and despite intense discussions between the Swiss and the Italian Social Democratic Parties, these peace promoting activities had been organized by the Social

Democratic Parties of the neutral countries.<sup>(8)</sup> The significance of the Women's Conference rests in the fact that Clara Zetkin, the international secretary general, convened this conference and that "active women comrades from Germany, Great Britain, France, Russia, Poland, The Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland" attended it. Neither the German nor the French delegation was an official one; they attended despite the official policy of their own parties which endorsed their respective governments for the duration of the war. This was clear proof of the break-up of the international Labour Movement also at international level; left-wing factions began appealing to the public - new formations on the political left had begun - and in this context the conference as such was significant to a certain extent, although, at the conference, the differences between the Bolshevik faction from Russia and Poland, on the one hand, and the other conference participants on the other, made themselves felt. However, the Bolshevik faction did issue a declaration stating that they would not distance themselves from any actions that were to be carried out based on the Declaration "To Women Comrades in All Countries". On this basis, then, the conference prepared a Manifesto which was circulated in some countries even before the end of the war.<sup>(9)</sup>

The bibliography by Georges Haupt, *La Deuxième Internationale 1889-1914. Etude Critique des Sources, Essai bibliographique*, [The II International 1889-1914. A Critical Study of Sources, a Bibliographical Essay] Paris 1964 contains seven documents from the two conferences in 1907 and 1910. By contrasts, the present Internet publication makes a total of 70 documents available including documents relating to the extraordinary conference in 1912, the planned third conference in 1914, and the Bern Conference in 1915. Although some of the documents (Erste Internationale Konferenz Sozialistischer Frauen [First International Conference of Socialist Women]; Report of the Socialist Women of Greater New York; Report of the Socialist Party Delegation. Proceedings of the International Socialist Congress) are available as hard copy in the printed version of these congresses published by Minkoff Reprint, they are included here for the sake of coherence. A considerable number of the documents were found in the official periodical of the Women's International, the *Die Gleichheit*.

Whenever possible all extant material has been included in the three official languages of the International. The documents consist of printed reports to and on the conferences. Conference material such as proposals, resolutions, draft agendas, etc., as well as the official reports in the *Vorwärts* (1907, 1910) or the *Berner Tagwacht* (1915). English and French language versions of the reports to the 2nd conference could not be located; various types of reports published in the press have not been included.

Compared to the comparatively comprehensive literature on the Socialist International, relatively little has been published on the International of Socialist Women, like for instance the article by Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Donne e socialismo: I congressi femminili della 2a Internazionale* [The Women's Conferences of the II International]; in, *Rivista Storica Italiana*, vol. 92, 1980, no. 2, p. 482-505, whose main virtue, however, is that it demonstrates the relevance of this Internet publication; also in existence is the unpublished doctoral thesis by Jürgen Kirchner, *Herausbildung und Geschichte der Sozialistischen Fraueninternationale und zu den Anfängen des Internationalen Frauentag - ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der II. Internationale* [Genesis and History of the Socialist Women's International and the Early History of the International Women's Day - a Contribution to the History of the II International], Leipzig 1982. In its newsletter, the *Mitteilungsblatt*, and in protocols from scholarly conferences such as the Clara Zetkin Colloquium, the Research Society "Geschichte des Kampfes der Arbeiterklasse um die Befreiung der Frau" [History of the Working-Class Struggle for the Emancipation of Women] often published contributions concerning the development of the Women's International. 1986 in Leipzig Manfred Leyh produced his doctoral thesis: *Der Kampf der Sozialistischen Fraueninternationale um das allgemeine Frauenwahlrecht und seine Auswirkungen auf die nationalen proletarischen Frauenbewegung in ausgewählten Ländern im Zeitraum von 1907-1918/19* [The Struggle of the Socialist Women's International in Favour of Universal Suffrage for Women and its Impact on National Women's Movements in Selected Countries in the Period 1907-1918/19]. On the occasion of the centenary of the Paris Congress in 1989 an article by Nicole Gabriel, *L'Internationale des femmes socialistes* [The Socialist Women's International] was published in *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, July-September 1989, no. 16. p. 32-41 ([http://www.persee.fr/articleAsPDF/mat\\_0769-3206\\_1989\\_num\\_16\\_1\\_404022/article\\_mat\\_0769-3206\\_1989\\_num\\_16\\_1\\_404022.pdf](http://www.persee.fr/articleAsPDF/mat_0769-3206_1989_num_16_1_404022/article_mat_0769-3206_1989_num_16_1_404022.pdf)).

Finally, Beate Eichhorn produced a fairly comprehensive master's thesis at the University of Vienna in 1992 under the title *Die sozialistische Frauenbewegung im Spiegel der "Gleichheit" (1914-1917)* [The Socialist Women's Movement as Reflected in the "Gleichheit" (1914-1917)].

Furthermore, a number of articles and thesis have been written on the development in various countries as well as biographical writings on Clara Zetkin, which among other subjects take up the Women's International. A comprehensive analysis has yet to be written, but essential material for undertaking such an analysis has now been made available here.

The material made available here has been found at:

Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv, Copenhagen,  
Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv, Stockholm,  
Biblioteka Sejmowa, Wydział Zbiorów Historii Społecznej, Warsaw,  
Bibliothek der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn,  
Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam,  
Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Zurich,  
Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, Berlin,  
Työväen Arkisto, Helsinki.

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## Notes

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1 - Petra Schulze, Die Bürgerliche und proletarische Frauenbewegung Deutschlands und die Rede Clara Zetkins auf dem Gründungskongress der II. Internationale 1889 von Paris in der historiographischen Literatur. In, Clara-Zetkin-Kolloquium: Clara-Zetkin-Kolloquium der Forschungsgemeinschaft "Geschichte des Kampfes der Arbeiterklasse um die Befreiung der Frau". 10, 1989, p. 24-32.

2 - See, Gerd Callesen, Angewandter Marxismus. Nina Bangs Stellung in der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Dänemarks. Theorie als Praxis. In, Wolfgang Hindrichs and Oskar Negt (Eds.): Der schwierige Weg zur Arbeiteremanzipation. Festschrift für Adolf Brock, Bremen 1992, p. 259-277, here p. 260-266.

3 - Susanne Karstedt, Die Gleichheit - eine "one-woman show". In, Ariadne. Almanach der deutschen Frauenbewegung. No 22, 1992, p. 14-21.

4 - See, International Tagung der Historiker der Arbeiterbewegung (XIV. Linzer Konferenz, 1978); Die Frau in der Arbeiterbewegung 1900-1939, part 1.2, Wien 1980.

5 - Christl Wickert: Kvinder, valget og fred. Omkring den internationale socialistiske kvindekonference i København 1910. In: Arbejderhistorie. København. No 29, October 1987, p. 14 - 28.

6 - Ibid; see also Gabriella Hauch: "Arbeite Frau! Die Gleichberechtigung kommt von selbst"? Anmerkungen zu Frauen und Gewerkschaften in Österreich vor 1914. In: Rudolf Ardel und Helmut Konrad (eds.): Dass unsere Greise nicht mehr betteln gehn!, Wien 1991, p. 62-86; Anna-Birte Ravn: "Lagging far behind all Civilized Nations". The Debate over Protective Labor Legislation for Women in Denmark, 1899-1913, p. 212, 216/ 217, 220. In: Ulla Wikander et al. (eds.): Protecting Women. Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880-1920, Urbana und Chicago 1995, p. 210-234; Ulla Wikander: Feminism, familj och medborgerskap. Debatter på internationella kongresser om nattarbetsförbud för kvinnor 1899-1919. Stockholm 2006, p. 271-276. Manuskript

7 - Postcard dated 20 August 1914 to Thorvald Stauning, leader of the Danish Social Democratic Party, in which she informed him that the conference could not be held, but that the report would be printed. The Archive and Library of the Danish Labour Movement (ABA), Copenhagen, Archive of the Social Democratic Party, box 529.

8 - See, Martin Grass, Friedensaktivität und Neutralität. Die skandinavische Sozialdemokratie und die neutrale Zusammenarbeit im Krieg, August 1914 bis Februar 1917, Bonn-Bad Godesberg 1975, p. 121-150.

9 - See the report in the Berner Tagwacht of 3 April 1915. It was written by Clara Zetkin, see Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, Series 2, vol.1, Berlin (GDR) 1958, p. 119.

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From: <http://library.fes.de/si-online/frauen-intro-en.html>

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